

Hot Topics In K-12 Education

While federal initiatives influence the broad directions of K-12 education, it's state and local governments that have the greatest impact on the day-to-day operations of public schools.

ALEC Report Card on American Education 1995: "No Correlation Between Spending and Student Achievement"

According to the *Report Card on American Education 1995* prepared by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), there is "no statistical correlation between spending and student achievement." In its third annual report (this report covering 1994-95), ALEC found that "the single largest government enterprise in America, our public schools, are still in neutral while most everything else is in high gear." According to the ALEC study, none of the "Top Ten Performing States" are the same as the "Top Ten Spending States." Washington does not appear on either list.

- "There are a number of specific reasons for our schools' failures, such as the domination of the teachers' unions over school management and policy, low expectations for student achievement (especially for minority students), and bloated bureaucracies." (ALEC 1996 National Chairman, State Rep. Dale Van Vyven, Ohio)
- "Standards are one of the most powerful means to improve education for all students." (Frank Newman, President, Education Commission of the States, (ECS))
- After the U.S. Department of Education released a report on June 17, 1996 showing that U.S. 4th graders ranked second (behind Finland) in a 32-nation survey of reading skills the report's author, Jeanne E. Griffith, acting commissioner at the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics said the report also shows that many U.S. students are not doing as well as they ought to be. "This report tells us that there is a substantial gap in the reading scores between schools that involve parents and schools that don't."

Washington's Profile	
Category	National Rank
Per Pupil Expenditures	20th
Teachers Salaries	20th
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	47th
4th Grade NAEP* Reading Score	19th
SAT** Score	2nd
Graduation Rate	25th

* National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Washington's rank is out of 39 total states.

** Not all states use the SAT, Washington's rank is out of 23 total states.
(ALEC)

School Choice

"It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders, without distinction or preference on account of race, color, caste, or sex." (Article IX, Section 1, Washington State Constitution) This Constitutional provision was the basis for the Doran Decision which resulted in the "1977 Basic Education Act" (BEA). The BEA changed the landscape for legislative involvement. Once the state assumed the court-ordered obligation for funding Washington's public schools, it also assumed a greater role in policymaking. While legislators do not have a choice in whether or not to fund Washington's public schools, they do have many choices when it comes to how basic education is delivered.

America's public school system was initiated in the early 1900s by Progressive Era reformers who believed that a rational, professional, and bureaucratic system — a “one best system” — could be established to maintain certain standards of education for all of society. Although such socialist thinking and economic planning have collapsed elsewhere in the world — most notably in the former Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe — we Americans have failed to apply the lessons in the few areas of our economy that are organized along similar lines. Tragically, although our unified, centralized government school system is a dinosaur in the information age, it fiercely resists market-oriented reforms. (*What Would a School Voucher Buy? The Real Cost of Private Schools*, David Boaz and R. Morris Barrett, Cato Institute)

Some policymakers suggest that the inherent inefficiency of public schools is due to the fact that the public education system in every state operates as a virtual monopoly, with little competition between public schools and substantial hurdles precluding parents from opting into the private system. If this is the case, and the system is not opened to competition soon, taxpayers will continue to dedicate increasingly scarce financial resources to an education system that is incapable of using those resources effectively to educate America's students. (*ALEC Report Card on American Education 1995*)

School Choice in Washington State

School districts have wide flexibility in establishing intradistrict choice programs. In 1990, HB 2379 established the “Educational Choice” program regarding interdistrict student transfers.

- School districts must release a student to another school district if: 1) a financial, educational, safety, or health condition affecting the student would likely be reasonably improved; 2) a school in another school district is more accessible to the parent's place of work or to the location of child care; 3) there is a special hardship or detrimental condition.
- A school district may deny a request for transfer if it would adversely affect the district's existing desegregation plan; and transfers requested for extracurricular activities are subject to rules adopted by the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association.
- The 1993 school reform bill (HB 1209) prohibits schools from charging tuition for out-of-district students who enroll under the state's “Educational Choice” program.

Charter Schools

In 1996, the Legislature chose not to act on Initiative 177 sending it instead to the voters to decide on November 5, 1996. I-177 requires each school district to hold an election to determine whether charter schools will be permitted. Until approved, the proposition must be on the ballot each time a school district seeks voter approval for a levy. Charter schools receive state money on a per pupil basis, are administered by a nonprofit organization, and are not subject to state laws governing public schools. Charter schools are exempt from the provisions of the 1993 school reform act (HB 1209). A charter school must reserve 15 percent of its student enrollment slots for low-income students.

- HB 2910 made it through the Republican-controlled House as an alternative to I-177, but died in the Democrat-controlled Senate Education Committee. This measure gave local school boards the authority to allow charter schools and require them to 1) meet or exceed the assessment standards as established for students in other public schools and 2) hire only teachers holding a valid state certificate.

- “At the broadest level, the emergence of charter schools can be seen as part of a larger political movement to fundamentally alter relationships between government and the governed.” (Kathleen McGree, *Redefining Education Governance: The Charter School Concept*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory)
- To date, 25 states have authorized charter schools.
- **According to the Arizona Charter School Association**, “Charter Schools encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods. They provide parents and students with expanded educational opportunities within the public school system, without the constraints of the traditional bureaucratic rules and structure. In essence charter schools allow for increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability.”
- **Where are we going?** (John Kakritz, CEO, Arizona Charter School Association)
 - We will witness the emergence of several multi-site charter schools which will rival school districts in size, resources, and ability to solve a variety of tough problems now facing small schools.
 - The Carnegie unit (seat time) will be eliminated as the standard measure for our public schools, both traditional and charter.
 - Teacher certification requirements will be eliminated or modified to something which only vaguely resembles the current system. There will be modifications in teacher training programs at Arizona universities as a result.
 - School districts will not only survive as the primary deliverer of K-12 public education, some will actually thrive under the charter law.
 - The charter school movement will gain momentum at a geometric rate for four to five years. Charter schools will be educating 10-15 percent of Arizona’s school age population by the year 2000 when the rate of growth will begin to slow.
 - The charter movement makes current-year funding for all public schools inevitable, as well as several other finance reforms. There will be only marginal data to show increases in academic achievement for several years as assessment technology catches up with the instructional innovation.
 - Some charter schools will fail. There will be public scandals resulting in school failure and closure at a few schools. Many more charters will not be renewed; yet, progress will continue.
- **According to the Education Commission of the State’s publication, *Emerging Issues in Charter School Financing***
 - 1) Charter schools have to do more with less: unlike other public schools, a charter school’s money cache must provide not only operating expenses, but also funding for facilities;
 - 2) Many school districts are reluctant and not sure how to relinquish control of state and local education funds; and
 - 3) Because charter schools are not exempt from state and federal special-education laws,

Common Objections to Charter Schools

- We need to fix all schools, not just a few charter schools.
- There’s nothing a charter school can do that ordinary schools couldn’t do with a little initiative and some regulatory waivers.
- Charter schools will lead to vouchers.
- Charter schools are elitist.
- Charter schools will drain resources from the existing system.

there is concern that one or more expensive special-needs students could “break the budget” for a small charter school.

Contract Schools

Some communities have resorted to revamping the actual management structure and style of their local schools to facilitate reform. This restructuring may be in the form of contracting, where a school district literally contracts with a for-profit company to manage the schools. Though many of the teachers in a given school may remain, the contracted company retains the right to make all reform decisions, including textbook and technology purchases, class structure and curriculum.

School-Based Management

A commonly practiced form of choice is that of school-based management (SBM). SBM (also known as democratization and school empowerment) is a direct response to the overburdened, district-level bureaucracy. Under SBM, the powers of reform-making and implementation are relegated to the individual schools, uniting teachers and administrators, as well as parents and students, in the hope of fostering locally determined, majority mandated reform.

In Chicago, for example, local school councils (LSCs) were formed within the schools in 1989. The LSCs were then given the prerogative of leading reform efforts within that community. In other words, decisions are made from the bottom up, with consensus assisting in the decision making process. Currently there are almost 550 groups with over 12,000 members. A 1994 evaluation showed that the LSCs successfully created “add-on” programs, such as after school music classes, increased multicultural planning, and expanded summer school offerings, with greater levels of change occurring within lower-income schools.

Accountability

Until recently, teachers, administrators and politicians did their best to improve schools, but only politicians were openly accountable for failed efforts in the form of losing an election. Accountability mandates that educators, too, must be responsible for the actions (or inaction). Rewards and punishments are given to those as a response to changes in student achievement.

In Kentucky, for example, the state supreme court mandated sweeping change in the school system. One of the major components of the plan was to make educators accountable. Because of this legislation, teachers and administrators may receive bonuses as high as 30 percent of their salaries when student achievement goes up. But if statistics show that achievement drops or remains the same, they are subject to a variety of punishments, from loss of tenure and bonuses to offering parents the right to transfer their children to more successful schools.

Vouchers

In 1996, the Legislature chose not to act on Initiative 173 sending it instead to the voters to decide on November 5, 1996. Under Initiative 173, parents would be eligible to receive “scholarship vouchers” for their child to attend a “voucher redeeming school” which is defined as any independent school with at least 25 students. Parochial schools do not qualify. The scholarships are limited to 55 percent (\$2,011) of the average state and local spending per student per school year.

Thoughts on School Vouchers

- “A school voucher of \$3,000 per student per year would give more families the option of sending their children to nongovernment schools. However, many people believe that such a small amount could not possibly cover tuition at a private school. In fact, Education Department figures show that the average private elementary school tuition in America is less than \$2,500. The average tuition for all private schools, elementary and secondary, is \$3,116, or less than half of the cost per pupil in the average public school, \$6,857.” (*What Would a School Voucher Buy? The Real Cost of Private Schools*, David Boaz and R. Morris Barrett, Cato Institute)
- “Researchers and practitioners alike know that a school with a shared culture and a shared commitment to academic excellence makes a difference. They know that expectations make a difference. They know that high standards make a difference. They know that a safe and orderly learning environment makes a difference. Most important, it is clear that religiously affiliated schools share all these characteristics.” (*Why Vouchers Are Needed For Poor Children*, Denis P. Doyle, Visiting Fellow in Education, The Heritage Foundation)
- In *Aguilar v. Felton* (1985), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Title 1* funds delivered to nonpublic schools created “excessive entanglement between church and state.” But in striking down the practices that led to its decision, the Supreme Court invited Congress to fashion a constitutionally defensible method of funding children who attend nonpublic schools. “Congress could create, for example, a Title 1 voucher system, an approach that would survive judicial scrutiny.” (*Why Vouchers Are Needed For Poor Children*, Denis P. Doyle, Visiting Fellow in Education, The Heritage Foundation)
* Formerly Chapter One, Education for the Disadvantaged, part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society
- Only two state legislatures, Ohio and Wisconsin, have approved a system of vouchers — and both are currently in the courts because religious schools are included. (Wisconsin’s original voucher system, authorized for Milwaukee schools only, did not include religious schools and was not challenged. Preliminary reviews have demonstrated improved parent involvement and satisfaction, but no measurable difference in student achievement.)

Student Discipline & School Safety

“What has been coined “school violence” is nothing more than societal violence that has penetrated the schoolhouse walls.” (*Schools Without Fear*, National Association of State Boards of Education, 1994)

Summary of Washington’s Law

Washington law prohibits firearms and dangerous weapons on school grounds. A student violating the prohibition against weapons may be expelled, a student violating the prohibition against firearms must be expelled. A student who interferes by force or violence with a teacher, administrator, or other staff person is subject to immediate suspension or expulsion. As in other states, several of Washington’s public schools are trying school uniform policies in an effort to change the environment of the classroom and school grounds.

- During the 1994-95 school year, there were a total of 3,018 reported “weapons incidents” on public school grounds including 488 involving firearms. During that same school year (with 81 percent reporting), there were 21 incidents in private schools including four involving firearms.

- In 1996, HB 2707 was approved by the House, but died in the Senate Law and Justice Committee. The measure would have: 1) created two new gang-related crimes for school-age persons; 2) increased the seriousness of the crime of willfully refusing to leave school grounds; 3) required the courts to notify the principal of a school if a student is charged with certain crimes; and 4) required a student's criminal history be sent to a new school along with other student records.

Public School Safety: An Overview

National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)

Violence and the threat of violence are escalating in many of our public schools, once considered safe havens for learning. Many teachers and students endure intimidation and fear of violence every day. Nearly one in four students and one in 10 teachers have been victims of violence. About 3 million crimes occur on or near school property every year. Approximately 135,000 guns are brought into school every day.

Times have changed dramatically in the last 50 years. For example, in 1940 the top seven problems in public schools identified by teachers were: talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise in the classroom, running in the halls, cutting in line, littering, and disobeying the dress code. Compare this with what educators considered problems in 1993: assaults by students on teachers and other students, weapons in school, racial or ethnic attacks, gang disruptions, shootings, knifings and drive-by shootings.

The root of school violence is complex and multifaceted. Unstable family situations, poverty, glorification of violence in our society and racial and ethnic tensions have all contributed to a tumultuous atmosphere in some public schools.

- Many states are trying a variety of solutions including alternative schools, conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, strengthening laws regarding truancy, expulsion for carrying weapons on school property. In addition, some schools are experimenting with dress codes or uniforms. For example, California, Delaware, North Carolina, Utah and Virginia have passed laws addressing the issue of school apparel. Although controversial, the policies do help to eliminate fights over clothing with specific professional or college team logos that are perceived as "gang related."
- A Michigan law requires students who commit rape or arson or knowingly possess a dangerous weapon on or near school property to be permanently expelled from all public schools in the state.
- Kansas state law allows school districts to expel troublesome students for an entire academic year and to refuse to enroll students who have been expelled from other districts.

School uniforms

School uniform policies are becoming more popular as a means to diminish disruption in schools and on school grounds. The benefits of school uniforms include: 1) decreasing violence among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers; 2) helping parents and students resist peer pressure; 3) students will concentrate on their school work more instead of clothing; and 4) a financial savings for parents by not having to compete to buy expensive shoes or designer clothing.

- Long Beach Unified School District in California is the first district nationwide to implement the public school uniform. Since the policy was implemented in 1994, the district has seen significant impact on violent acts in school. The Will Rogers Middle School principal said on the Osgood File (KIRO Radio 6/24/96) that fighting has been reduced by half. The district recently reached an out of court

settlement with 26 low-income parents who sued because they could not afford uniforms and said the policy denied equal access for poor children. The district agreed to give parents clear notice on how they can obtain uniforms or opt out of the program.

- A ruling in Phoenix Arizona by Superior Court Judge Michael D. Jones upheld a school uniform policy with no opt-out provision saying the policy does not violate the First Amendment rights of free expression.

Driver's License

Indiana state law prevents students who have been suspended twice or expelled from getting a driver's license. In 1995, Governor Lowry vetoed a portion of the "Becca Bill" which would have required compliance with compulsory attendance laws to obtain a driver's license.

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